

## The Persecuted Christian

Written by Mac Hammond

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Smyrna was a beautiful little seacoast town on the Aegean Sea. It was a gorgeous city, with wide boulevards and beautiful buildings, and it had become a resort town for wealthy Roman aristocracy.

As such, Smyrna had become a community on the leading social edge of its day. Because of its strong ties to Rome, spiritually and socially, it was a center for worshipping the Roman emperor. Emperor worship was at an apex of popularity at this time, and Smyrna was into it "lock, stock and barrel."

However, in Revelation 2:8-11, the Bible describes how the church at Smyrna suffered great persecution because it opposed this practice. To her contemporaries the church at Smyrna was known as "the persecuted church."

Jesus is addressing the challenge of persecution they faced. Even though much of the church world was experiencing persecution to one degree or another, Smyrna was immersed in that sad experience. They received the greatest portion of the persecution going on then.

Today, Christians are not even remotely in the same boat with Smyrna; those people's lives were in jeopardy every day. Their experience has hardly any relevance to how we exercise our Christianity in America today. We simply do not know what persecution is. Because of that, we take our faith too lightly, and we miss something important in our pursuit of the crown of life.

### **It Will Come**

The first thing we need to know about persecution is that it is going to come: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Persecution is nothing more than being mocked or reviled by men. The results can be anything from verbal insults, to physical harm, to actual death. But it is coming against you for your faith, your belief in Jesus.

There are always exceptions, but as a rule, in our society verbal persecution is about all you will suffer. Only recently have we seen people murdered for their faith here in America.

If you are not suffering at least some persecution, you are not living godly in Christ Jesus. If you are living for Jesus, somebody is going to have something to say about it. If that is not happening to you, you are too conformed to the world and not conformed enough to the image of Jesus. That's Bible.

### **Turn the Other Cheek**

The second thing you need to know about persecution is that you need to turn the other cheek, not resist.

For many people, that concept simply does not compute. So let us clear up some of the misconceptions about turning the other cheek. Jesus' teaching is a good place to start.

"And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples

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came to Him" (Matt. 5:1).

The Sermon on the Mount was not a general address to everyone about how to live life; it was addressed to the disciples, the ones who were going to be taking the gospel into the world when Jesus left. He was teaching them how to conduct themselves as ministers of the gospel.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10-12).

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt. 5:38-39).

Here we have a source of misunderstanding which has plagued the religious world for centuries and has caused many people to say, "I don't want any part of being a Christian if you have to let the world walk all over you."

This is ignorance gone to seed.

The Bible makes it clear that we are to resist the devil, the incarnation of evil, and he will flee from us (James 4:7). This sounds as if it contradicts what Jesus taught earlier (Matt. 5:39), unless you read that Scripture in context. Jesus is instructing His disciples about the conduct of ministry regarding persecution. When evil people come against you because of your stand for Jesus, you do not need to defend yourself; turn the other cheek.

### **Resist Evil**

But on every other occasion when you confront evil that does not fall into the category of persecution for your faith, you are to strongly resist evil.

If someone breaks into your house and rapes your wife, are you going to turn the other cheek and offer him your daughter also? Get serious! You know you would not, and neither would I.

You resist evil in every way possible, except when you are being persecuted for the name of Jesus. This is true not only on an individual basis, but also on a corporate basis. As a country, we resist evil on a national level. God does not say we should not defend our nation, we should not fight or we should not kill.

"But, Mac, doesn't the Bible say, 'You shall not kill?'"

No, it does not! It says, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13). As a matter of fact, Ecclesiastes 3:3 says there is a time to kill, and one of those occasions is when you're defending the nation where God has placed you.

Romans 13 says, The authorities that exist are appointed by God (v. 1), and that government

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does not bear the sword in vain (v. 4). This wimpy brand of Christianity that says you have to let the world walk all over you is straight from the pit of hell. This teaching chases people right out the back door. Who would want to be part of that?

Yet in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37). There are going to be occasions when you have to stand against evil with every conceivable tool at your disposal and resist it to the very core of your being, or the devil will run roughshod over you.

Very often, the people who say, "Peace, brother," are the same people who do not know the true meaning of turning the other cheek. When someone comes against what they believe, instead of turning the other cheek, they get offended, defensive and start arguing.

This is what it means to turn the other cheek: You simply love the persecutor, letting him see the light of God shining through you.

The most effective response to persecution that we will ever have in the name of Jesus is to smile, love persecutors and not defend ourselves. Let the Lord be your recompense and justification. Then He can use you to bring them into the kingdom. They will see something in you no one else has shown them: tolerance of criticism. Jesus does not need your defense. Besides, it is His reputation at stake, not yours.

### **Persecution Carries Great Reward**

The third thing you need to know about persecution is that it carries great reward. When you are willing to be faithful even to death, Jesus said He would give you a crown of life.

Just because it is not likely to be necessary in our society today does not mean this is not typically a standard of measurement for us. We need to become determined in our hearts that we would be faithful even if it required our death. It is the only way we will inherit a crown of life.

And do not be so arrogant as to say, "I would never deny Jesus!" I can remember somebody named Peter who said that, and he walked with Jesus in the flesh, saw the miracles and felt the presence of Jesus in a way we cannot until we are in heaven. Yet he still denied Him three times. So be certain you make an accurate assessment of yourself. Are you willing to be faithful even to death?

The letter to Smyrna carries a very significant message for us today. Dealing with pressure brought on by adverse circumstances is going to be a necessity if we are ever to inherit the crown of life.

### **Poverty and Prosperity**

"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9).

Notice that poverty is identified here as an adverse circumstance, not something God brings to you. But after mentioning their poverty, the Lord reminds them, "But you are rich." You may be experiencing material lack now because of your assignment in the earth or because you are

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part of a church under great persecution, but never forget you are rich in eternal things:

"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:20-21).

God may give some of us a call on our lives that temporarily makes it impossible for us to experience the limitless prosperity that is His promise to each of us.

If the Lord calls you to go up the Amazon River, turn left at the fourth fork and disappear into the mountains somewhere to minister the gospel to an obscure tribe, you cannot take your Cadillac, your checking account and your wardrobe with you. If you are going to answer the call of God, there will always be things you have to leave behind.

Does that mean it is not the will of God for you to prosper? No. It means sometimes the way we are called prevents us from walking in the fullness of prosperity here on earth.

But answer the call anyway, and you'll lay up treasure for yourself in heaven. Do not forget: You are rich. You are rich in Jesus Christ. You will never have a need that is not met.

The call of God always takes precedence. There are many people who have fallen into a ditch because of the "prosperity" message; they will not answer the call of God because it would limit what their material blessings could be. Do not fall into this trap.

One of the things Jesus was pointing out to the church at Smyrna was that it is not His will for us to experience poverty, which is why He said, "But you are rich" (Rev. 2:9). You have access to the source of all provision; do not forget that.

### Those Who Are Not

Jesus continues in verse 9, "...and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." Sadly, we will probably receive most of our persecution from those who say they are Christians but are not. These people adopt a value system other than the Bible, but they still call themselves Christians and are threatened by your stand on the Word of God.

The word *tribulation* in verse 9 is defined in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance as "pressure, persecution, or affliction." Affliction is anguish or distress produced by the pressure of adverse circumstance.

The enemy of your soul cannot deceive you if you know the Word of God. The only way he can keep you from being faithful is to pressure you. Pressure is intended to push you away from your committed stand for the Lord, causing you to be unfaithful and, therefore, to lose your crown of life.

Jesus is telling us prophetically that adverse circumstances are going to come for the church. Your challenge and mine is to remain faithful regardless of that pressure; then we will inherit a crown of life.

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"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

The word *life* in the Greek is *Zoe*, "the God-kind of life, life as God has it." The crown represents authority, rule and dominion. If you want God's kind of life, which incorporates dominion and authority over every adverse circumstance, you will have to learn how to be faithful no matter what the circumstances and pressures are.

### Being Faithful

We must know what God defines as being faithful, and then we must become that. *Faithful* means "loyal and devoted." What does it mean to be faithful to God? It begins by being faithful to His Word. You cannot be faithful to God without being faithful to His Word; God and His Word are one.

His Word comes to us in two ways: the written Word in the Bible, which applies to everybody in general; and the word spoken to our hearts by the Holy Spirit-things about our giftings, our personalities and our calls which are unique to us.

If you are going to get a crown of life, you have to be faithful to God's Word, regardless of the form in which He gives it to you.

Do you say, "I have been faithful; I tithe; I go to church every Sunday. Why do I still lack dominion and authority over circumstances?"

Then I will ask, "Have you been faithful to what God has spoken to your heart? Were you faithful to share your faith with your neighbor last week, when you knew God put it on your heart to do so? Were you faithful to do that little thing for your husband or wife He told you to do, even though it meant humbling your heart?"

Those kinds of things come to bear on receiving your crown of life and the dominion He wants you to walk in just as much as obeying the written Word does.

Then is being faithful measured only by what you do? No. There are two other primary considerations regarding faithfulness: what you think and what you say. If you are unfaithful in either of these areas, you have no right to expect dominion over the circumstance producing the pressure.

You cannot be faithful with your words and your actions if you are not faithful in your heart and mind. Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matt. 15:8).

You can act like a good church-going Christian, be sweet to everybody and still be thinking bad thoughts about your neighbor and be angry, unforgiving, coveting and lustful.

Why do you think Paul said, Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5)? That is faithfulness.

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Here is the bottom line from the letter to the church at Smyrna. You can overcome every circumstance standing in the way of God's will for your life - you can put on that crown of life, and the authority will carry you through every worldly pressure which comes along - as long as you are faithful to the Lord in what you think, speak and do. That may not be easy, but it is simple.

Source: *The Last Millennium* by Mac Hammond

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